Connecticut must continue leadership in aerospace and related technologies

By John B. Larson

This May marks the 75th anniversary of Charles Lindbergh's historic flight across the Atlantic. Since that time, aerospace and propulsion technology in the U.S. has reached a level of sophistication unmatched by any other nation.

A significant number of advances in these fields have their roots in Connecticut and it is essential to the economic health of the state that we continue to be a leader in the production of aerospace, propulsion and aviation technology throughout the world.

Our state has a long and proud history in these fields; from the time that Fredrick Rentschler founded his engine company in East Hartford in 1925 to the present, when Pratt and Whitney engines now power more than half of all commercial aircraft in the world. In the area of space technology, it was fuel cells produced here that powered the Apollo mission in the 1960s and currently power NASA's Space Shuttle Orbiter and it is space suits produced in the region that protect our astronauts.

In the commercial sector, America's air industry has been globally dominant, contributing an estimated $259 billion to the nation's economy in 1999. In 2000, the latest year of comparative data, the U.S. aerospace industry posted the highest trade balance of all industry categories.

However, despite these positive statistics, it is clear the U.S. is involved in a quiet and increasingly difficult struggle to maintain our world leadership in the aerospace field, both commercially and militarily. It is a struggle that will most certainly play a role in Connecticut's economic future.

In January 2001, the European Union unveiled its plan for gaining dominance of the global aerospace market entitled, *European Aeronautics: A Vision for 2020.* This plan lays out an ambitious $93 billion agenda for winning global leadership in aeronautics and aviation over the next 20 years. Despite our decades of success in the aerospace field, if the U.S. fails to meet this focused, coordinated effort by our European competitors we will jeopardize our economic and security advantages in one of the most important capital goods industries.

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Due to a combination of a shrinking workforce, loss of market share to European competition, declining government, and commercial investment in aerospace research and development, unfair foreign trade practices, and strict U.S. export controls, the U.S. aerospace industry already finds its leadership role shrinking. Aerospace sales as a percentage of GDP fell from 3.5 percent in 1960 to 1.5 percent in 2000.

Both private industry and federal funds dedicated to research and development have fallen in constant dollar terms, from a total of $30 billion in 1985 to under $14 billion in 1999 (the latest year for which data was available). This downward trend coincided with a similar downward trend in the U.S. share of the world aerospace market, which declined during the same time period from about 70 percent of the global market to less than 50 percent now.

A resurgent Europe has become a formidable commercial adversary. At the same time that U.S. industry is losing market share, the administration has proposed cutting $58 million in aeronautics research at NASA and $20 million at the FAA for next year.

Funding for NASA means more than sending shuttles into orbit —it has far-reaching impact on our lives. The continued exploration of space and further advancement of space technology is critical to important advancements here on Earth and is tied to Connecticut's economic future.

To reverse the trends of declining research and development funding, and in an effort to protect our state and regional economic and security interests, I have introduced bipartisan legislation entitled the Aeronautics Research and Development Revitalization Act of 2002. This effort focuses on the importance of aviation and aeronautics R&D for the nation, reflecting the Aerospace industry's role as a driver of economic growth in the U.S. through its consumption and production of high-technology and its creation of high-paying jobs.

The technology of space exploration constitutes the next generation of science and technology innovation, and Connecticut can lead the way. Through a grant of $1.5 million from the Air Force Office of Science and Research to the University of Connecticut, we are beginning to lay the groundwork for a Connecticut Center for Advanced Technology (CCAT), which hopefully will be constructed at Rentschler Field in East Hartford.

Aviation was born in America nearly 100 years ago and we cannot allow what is now among the most important industries in Connecticut to decline. ■

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